

Education Committee
Raised H.B. No. 5305 - Support

Good afternoon Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Roland Bishop and I am the Secretary Treasurer of CSEA SEIU Local 2001, a union representing approximately 2,500 paraeducators across our state. I am here to testify in support of House Bill 5305, an act concerning school paraprofessional training.

Two years ago our union stopped referring to these workers as "paraprofessionals" and adopted the term "paraeducators", to reflect the fact that today's paras have evolved into education specialists, often handling the most challenging assignments in the classroom. Paraeducators work with children in early childhood programs, students on the autism spectrum, children with developmental disabilities, and even those who are medically fragile. Ask a special needs student who the most important person is in his or her life at school and invariably the answer will be his or her para.

Paraeducators get involved with virtually every aspect of education, from developing lesson plans to engaging in intensive one-on-one instruction. The truth is Paraeducators perform a lot of duties that are traditionally associated with teachers. And in regard to special-education, they deal with everything from the development of an IEP to dealing with toileting. And it seems that every year there are new responsibilities and expectations for paraeducators. Because they are in this business for the kids, paras take on the responsibilities with dedication and enthusiasm, but that enthusiasm does not preclude the need for trainings.

Though paras deal with some of the most difficult issues in the classroom, the training that they receive is often woefully inadequate. The problem is that despite the key role that paras play, they are often relegated to afterthought status in any policy discussions or priority setting on education. House Bill 5305 states that school districts have a duty to provide trainings that give information on the duties and responsibilities that paraeducators are expected to perform, are consistent with the needs of the students to whom they are assigned and given before their assignment begins (usually at the start of the year). This should be common sense, but many districts fail to live up to even this rudimentary level of training.

While H.B. #5305 would help correct the training shortfall, it by no means a cure-all for paraeducators. In addition to lack of trainings, we find that the staffing levels for paraeducators across school districts are very inconsistent, with some school systems cutting significant numbers of para positions despite the demonstrated need to maintain or increase staffing levels. Additionally, most school districts have only one job title for Paras despite the fact that there is an extremely wide range of functions performed. There is also pronounced need for a para career ladder with a graduated set of required experience and training. Such a system would ensure that the right person is performing the right job duties.

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